"Town Meetings of the Imagination": Discovering American Language through Literature

By Marion Tangum

A little over a year ago, with knees shaking under my long wool skirt, I walked into a crumbling building in Pyatigorsk State Linguistic University (PSLU). The dimly lit classroom was full of unsmiling Russian 18-year-olds who were there to hear what I had to say about "American" English as I "lectured" about American literature. "Hear" is exactly what they intended to do. They equated improving their precise but spartan English with Americanizing their accent, and were far less interested in what I had to say than they were in how I pronounced it. And they did not anticipate saying anything themselves at all. "It is not, after all, out of a dictionary that we learn language, but out of the mouths of other people."

Mikhail Bakhtin

As for me, once I was given my marching orders by the PSLU Dean-"You will be giving a 90-minute lecture every day"-and once I entered the polite but unfriendly atmosphere of the classroom, I anticipated a potentially deadly subsequent three weeks of classes. Instead, our understanding of the meanings of "American" English and American literature were deepened by a dialogic approach to both: a series of noisy, argumentative, exciting "town meetings of the imagination."

I put quotations marks around that term because I borrow it from the work of Gary Lee Stonum (1979), noted scholar of William Faulkner's fiction, and David Minter (1982), who described Faulkner's later works similarly. Novels such as Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* and *Absalom, Absalom!* invite the reader in, says Stonum, to participate in the process of making meaning of the language in the complex dialogs that comprise the works. Reader, author, narrators, and characters all conspire in town meetings-like forums. The Russian students and I emulated that process in our ultimate approach to learning language via literature.

But not at first. At first, what I thought were enticing invitations to "ask questions," "speak up," or "give me your opinion" (of this poem by e.e. cummings or this passage in Frederick Douglass's autobiography, for example) all fell flat. There was no visible response, just polite but silent stares. (Not a lack of interest, really; there was certainly interest in listening to how I pronounced "What do you think?") They had never experienced participatory decision-making about language or literature before.

I asked the students if they knew what a "town meeting" was. No one knew. These students had studied English since they were children. They certainly knew the meaning of "town" and "meeting," but together those words had no clear meaning for them. Snarski (1997:54) notes that

students may be puzzled by phrases comprising of perfectly understandable words because of a gap in their cognitive development. I argue that the problem was simply that the phrase was not part of their experience.

I was nonetheless determined to teach them that language is nothing if not participatory. It is as Bakhtin (1981:294) said above, language comes not out of a dictionary but, rather, always and inherently from other people. It is tinged not only with other people's accents but with other people's intents and meanings. It is always rhetorical, never neutral.

The students' lack of understanding of "town meeting" is a perfect example. Its meaning is a politically charged, thorough and fundamental testimonial to democracy. Despite their newly established democracy, and the fact that we could see the Pyatigorsk Town Hall from the window of our third-floor classroom, and the fact that one student's father was Mayor of the neighboring town, the students had no idea what that phrase meant. This spoke volumes about the current progress of their "democracy."

To participate effectively in a dialog on language and the literature we would use to explore it, the students needed to understand the idiosyncratic nature of pronunciation and the ambiguity of language itself. To this end I tried an experiment that I developed from Nietzschze's claim regarding the subjectivity of all language, even the simplest of definitions. I like to use this experiment with some of my Southwest Texas State University students who come to college not knowing how to "read"-not having studied literature in high school in a setting where their participation was encouraged. I asked the Russian students to write the meaning of a word that I wrote on the chalkboard. I wanted to know what they "see" when they see that word. The word was "leaf."

Their definitions were richly diverse, as they are each time I try this exercise with students, whether native English speakers or not. The students were intrigued with the samples I read to them: "a turning page in a book"; "a heart-shaped, veined, green growth from a tree's limb at the end of a stem"; "a brown and crumpled object on the sidewalk under a tree"; "something that makes a table longer"; "a sign of spring"; "a sign of winter"; "life's changing cycle"; "life."

This simple exercise and asking them to tell me which example was correct or most correct, or to rank the definitions according to correctness, helped more than anything I could have said to change their behavior in the classroom from passively listening to actively participating, indeed, arguing. American literature is nothing if not a forum for just such argument. Its rich collaborations, indeed its collisions, simply exemplify a central tenet of American democracy: Paradox. "A Bering Strait Eskimo Creation Myth," juxtaposed to the Declaration of Independence, considered in light of Frederick Douglass' autobiography, set the stage for the unsettling issue of race relations surrounding and infiltrating the twentieth century literature to come, as I will explain in a moment.

Meanwhile, paradox was seen by the students everywhere. We understood together a historical look at American literature with special focus on the nineteenth century: Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter and Young Goodman Brown;* Poe's *Cask of Amontillado; Melville's Billy Budd* as well as references to *Moby Dick* . The paradox they saw in each involved lightness in dark and darkness

in light. They saw emotional death calling into question the generally accepted definition of "life" in the case of *Young Goodman Brown* , and the contradiction created by the ambiguous possibilities in the murderer Montresor's final words (or are they Poe's?) in *The Cask of Amontillado*.

I asked them what they thought about a question from one of my American students a few years ago: "Why can't we read cheerful stories?" Answers were mostly more questions about the origins of the United States, its founding on a paradox involving the definition of "men"; about the definitions of "light" and "dark" in the American experience, and their rhetorical uses over time. I read to them from Toni Morrison's *Darkness in the American Imagination* , pointing out the way that text is structured to reveal her rhetorical thrust in the words themselves. This is juxtaposed to her words relating instances in American literature of a racist definition of "dark."

The focus of every session of our "town meetings" from that point on was the ambiguity of English that makes possible the subjectivity of its uses in the development of both American English and American literature. By this point, my three weeks of study with my Russian audience truly could be defined as a series of "town meetings." Walt Whitman's "barbaric yawp," for example, drew us into spirited discussions of the definition of poetry. Students doubted that the language in *Song of Myself* (much of which was not part of their British-learned vocabularies) met the standard they had been taught. We compared it to Robert Lowell's *Ode to a Dandelion* written within the same general time-frame and much more British. This was accessible to them initially. But their skepticism dissipated when we studied Whitman's simple, short, and profound *When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer,* with its paradoxical presentation of definitions of knowledge and beauty. The language sounds British, yet it is thoroughly radical, and thoroughly within their experience. The students live at the base of Mashoute, a mountain they have roamed since they were children and to which they retreat for sustenance. They talk of the mountain with both the pride and the reverence that come with at least one definition of deep understanding. It won Whitman enough of a place in their hearts that they continued to debate, and some to argue forcibly in favor of a poetic definition that would include the language of *Song of Myself*.

After Whitman, they were perfectly accepting of Frost. They talked enthusiastically about the ambiguity in the title of his *Home Burial* and how that phrase would be defined by the character of the husband or by the wife, Amy, or by Frost. They loved the sounds in *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* but argued with me and with each other fiercely about the implications of the poem; What is its definition? How does it shed light on a generally accepted definition of "responsibility?" Does it portend suicide? Or is it only speaking of beauty? Or is there beauty without the reality of death as it is found in the poem? Some refused to be swayed by anything negative I said about the poem, even as I pointed to the lines of the poem for support. I think they were wrong in their reading of its ambiguities. Their energetic argument in disputing my position was much more instructional for them than my delivering a lecture would have been.

With Faulkner the following week, the debate diminished, but their questions of race and race relations in the United States increased. I told them my view of the stories of *Go Down, Moses* . For me it is in terms of a clashing and confrontational dialog that I hear that novel at work, and the work is that of defining. One of the major definitions at issue in *Go Down, Moses* (1973:279)

is that of what it means to be free: "We are seeing a new era, an era dedicated, as our founders intended it, to freedom, liberty and equality for all, to which this country will be the new Canaan." The narrator earnestly explains an idealistic but seemingly helpless black character to Isaac, one of the principal, idealistic white characters. Isaac looks around "the empty fields without plow or seed" and says, "Freedom from what? From work? Canaan?" (1973:279). Refusing to accept his birthright of ownership of the plantation and the black people whom he would inherit along with it, Isaac later tells his cousin McCaslin, "I am free." McCaslin, in disbelief, replies, "No, not now nor ever, we from them nor they from us" (1973:299). Speaking of Isaac some seven years later, an unnamed narrator "found long since that no man is ever really free and probably could not bear it if he were" (1973:281).

This last discussion, suggesting a definition of narrator or narrators, describes our "town meetings." Students were accustomed to multiple narrators in novels, as in Dostoevsky's works for example. As we listened to the voices in Faulkner and Morrison, they were not attuned to the combative nature of the narration. Nor were they attuned to the manner in which a narrator would retell quite differently that which had just been told, seemingly stepping up to a microphone and taking it away from the speaker to correct ostensible errors alleged by the challenging narrator. Again, that competitiveness among the narrators centers on definitions. A good example is in Faulkner's chapter called "Pantaloon in Black" (1973:135), which contains just such a pair of competing narrators. The first voice we hear is this one:

He stood in the worn, faded clean overalls which Mannie herself had washed only a week ago, and heard the first clod stride the pine box. Soon he had one of the shovels himself, which in his hands (he was better than six feet and weighed better than two hundred pounds) resembled the toy shovel a child plays with at the shore...flinging the dirt with that effortless fury...until at last the grave, save for its rawness, resembled any other marked off without order about the barren plot by shards of pottery and broken bottles and old brick and other objects insignificant to sight but actually of a profound meaning and fatal to touch, which no white man could have read.

The narrator is never named but the students noticed a number of things about "him." They all thought the voice belonged to a male: He knows well and is sympathetic toward the character identified as "he" (a young black man whose equally young wife has died unexpectedly). The narrator refers to the wife not only by name but emphasizes his understanding of the shock of her death by telling us that "Mannie herself" had just washed his overalls. My students thought he was white because of the vocabulary he used at the time this story was written in the largely illiterate South. They thought he had a deep understanding of the black community. For example, he shares their belief in the profundity of meaning ("fatal to touch") of the outwardly undistinguished objects decorating the grave.

The second narrator, who takes over the story telling midway through, begins his section like this:

After it was over, it didn't take long: they found the prisoner on the following day, hanging from the bell-rope in a negro schoolhouse about two miles from the sawmill, and the coroner had pronounced his verdict of death at the hands of a person or persons unknown and surrendered the

body to its next of kin all within five minutes-the sheriff's deputy who had been officially in charge of the business was telling his wife about it.

Students quickly noticed that the personal pronoun "he" was now the impersonal noun clause "the prisoner." And the death and funeral of Mannie and the subsequent lynching of her husband, narrated in poignant detail by the first in charge, are summed up by this narrator only as "the business." These obvious contrasts led them to discover not-so-obvious contradictions in narrative accounts in other parts of *Go Down, Moses.*

This led to a debate on a definition of "narrator" itself. We considered the claim of Russian linguist Bakhtin that the central question of the novel always is "Who is talking?" and "To whom?" According to Bakhtin, there is no such thing in the novel as an omniscient narrator. Rather, the novel is voices speaking in turn, and sometimes in collaboration. The novelist is much like the conductor of a symphony orchestra, handing over the solo or duet role first to this and then to these narrators.

Those discussions set the stage for the final few days of our meetings, which were devoted to Toni Morrison: *Beloved* and *Jazz* . The question of narrator, or narrators, central to both those works, became even more complicated for the students than it did in Faulkner. The language, some said, was not appropriate for that of a narrator. In *Beloved* for example, narrators sometimes speak in short, clipped, ungrammatical phrases that do not in the least resemble sentences. Word order is jumbled, especially in the case of the character Beloved, narrating an experience that is other worldly in which word order does not pertain. Narrative voices sometimes seem to be superimposed on each other, challenging readers to untangle them.

But the students loved *Beloved* . Through its authentic voices, they experienced the impact of slavery in the United States more personally than they ever had in existing historical accounts, or, I would argue, ever could. They were enraptured as I read to them Paul D's telling what is was like in Georgia chained to 45 other men. "The wrists he held out for the bracelets that evening were steady as the legs he stood on when chains were attached to the leg irons. But when they shoved him onto the box and dropped the cage door down, his hands quit taking instruction" (1988:107); of the landowner himself directing them to "put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right and don't forget to line them up" (1988:193). As Paul D concluded from the landowner's beatings, "definitions belonged to the definers not the defined."

Morrison's most recent novel, *Jazz* (1993:3), begins with a single utterance: "Sth." Full of many wrong headed judgments, the novel ends thoroughly open to the reader. It urges the reader, as musical jazz does its contrapuntal participants, to take up the narrative role with new, more comprehensive understanding: "Look where your hands are."

The students and I continued to argue over the relative power of the narrative voice and the strategies among the voices until it was time for me to leave what had become a warm, noisy, and exciting environment. What we discovered in some way each day and corroborated was the evidence in the American literature we studied of the power of the narrative voices and how it confirmed Bakhtin's insistence on the importance of who is talking and to whom.

My experience in teaching "American" English to Russian students well-versed in "British" English clearly corroborates Maria Snarski's opinion. Language learners must use what they know to make decisions about new information (I would argue, claims to information) before they can advance in their knowledge and put it to use. As Snarski expresses it, "For the lecturer, no doubt, it is easy to walk into class, deliver the information, and leave. What about the students?" (1997:54).

Snarski is right: The "lecturer" (I prefer "teacher") cannot be there forever.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my dynamic experience in Pyatigorsk is evidence that the dialog continues, among those students, their faculty, and me. Not long ago I received a letter from one of the students. "Sasha," wrote three single-spaced pages on some of the texts we talked about several months ago. Toni Morrison's *Jazz* , he argues, although an example of a "unique manner of writing," is not up to her artistry in *Beloved* , "decidedly the best of the two" for its "spirit," its "glamour." He goes on to make strong claims for characters: "Paul D impressed me more than anyone else." And for organization: "There is a strict chronological order." And for development: likening his individual reading experience to that of putting together the disparate pieces of a puzzle comprised of subjective narrators' (a redundant phrase) "feelings, thoughts, images." He surmises, "I guess the same thing is happening with characters of the novel for their understanding, too."

Now, I disagree with Sasha on a few counts. But that is not, in my view, what "counts." What counts, is that I have the chance to tell him, and tell him why. The last line of his letter was, "Looking forward to your reply."

Marion Tangum is an Associate Professor of English and the Associate Vice President for Research and Sponsored Programs at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, Texas. She teaches and does research on Black American women writers, Faulkner and the United States South, and other later American literature, all from a rhetorical perspective.

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